

THE BLOCKADE RUNNERS

A TALE OF THE CONFEDERACY

THE Banshee, the finest and fleetest of the many blockade runners trading between Liverpool and Wilmington, lay at anchor in the River Mersey. She had completed a successful voyage under the command of Captain Blondin and was about to start upon another.

Her decks, clean as those of a yacht, gave no indication of her being the carrier of a cargo of great value to the Confederacy, but below decks it was different. Huge oblong cases had been carefully hoisted aboard and stowed away. "Machinery," they were marked; "machinery of war" would have been nearer the truth, for they were rifled guns, destined for use by the Southerners. Other cases there were, smaller and more nearly square, also labeled "machinery," containing the gun mounts and the ammunition, and further aft still smaller cases containing small arms and ammunition for use in the Confederate army. Nor were the means of repairing physical damage forgotten. The after part of the hold was filled with small packages of surgical instruments and medical supplies.

Taken all in all, the cargo was a valuable one, and Messrs. Croft & Duncan, brokers, the owners of the Banshee, had good reason to congratulate themselves upon the selection by the Confederate agents of a ship to carry this cargo, and still more reason to congratulate Captain Blondin, whose skill and daring had made this selection possible.

Captain Blondin, small and slim of figure and immaculate as to dress, was simple and unaffected, as of old. Success had not turned his head and his happiest moments were spent in the seclusion of his cabin and upon the high seas.

He had just finished an interview with Mr. Croft when Dalton, his first mate, came below to say that a Mr. Rutherford desired to see him.

"I suppose that I must see him, Dalton," he said with a sigh, "but I wish that all this calling would come to an end; I am heartily sick of it."

Big and coarse, a red faced giant with small gray eyes that twinkled genially yet never looked one squarely in the face and a would-be jovial and familiar manner, soiled as to linen and unkempt as to person—such a man was Mr. Rutherford, the very antithesis of Captain Blondin in all things.

As Captain Blondin looked at him for a moment, before speaking, a feeling of disgust overcame him. He was a man of strong likes and dislikes, and there was that about Mr. Rutherford which was calculated to arouse the latter feeling within him. It was hard, however, to overcome his natural habits of courtesy and almost involuntarily he inquired what he could do for his visitor.

"Much or little, Captain," replied Rutherford as he took a seat, unbidden, and placed his elbows upon the table and rested his face in his hands. "Much or little, Captain. My name's Rutherford. My errand here is to put money into your pocket, if you're willing to have it put there. How would you like to turn over a cool hundred thousand dollars, Captain?"

For a few moments the two men sat gazing at each other in silence. Captain Blondin's face flushed, then paled, as he looked steadily at his visitor; Rutherford's shifty eyes wavered between Captain Blondin's face and the objects in the cabin, but not the slightest movement or expression upon the former escaped him.

"What is expected from me in return for this sum?" inquired Captain Blondin at last, his voice quite calm and even.

"Nothing much, Captain. Nothing that is hard to do. Are we alone?" He cast a suspicious glance around the cabin.

"We are alone. Go on, sir."

"Well, then, Captain, it's this. I'm a representative of the United States government. We want to put a stop to this blockade running. I know just what you have below hatches. It's a cargo that we can't afford to have get away, and we are willing to pay you well for it. A hundred thousand dollars is not to be picked up every day, even in a trade that pays as well as the contraband. What do you say to the proposition?"

Captain Blondin's reply was prompt and decisive.

"You scoundrel!" he said hotly. "You hound! Do you think that your paltry dollars will buy me?"

Rutherford's assurance was of proof; he did not move from his seat.

"Hear me out, Captain, before you decide finally," he said coolly. "Remember, I don't ask you to do much, and you stand to make a fortune out of it, a fortune without risk. All I ask of you is that you will take the Banshee to a certain port that I will name, anchor her in the harbor and leave her with your crew. And for this, merely this," his voice sank to a whisper, "for this you'll receive the sum of just \$100,000 in good British gold."

As he spoke Rutherford keenly watched Captain Blondin's face. He read there first, loathing, then indecision, then what he took to be a sudden gleam of cupidity. And as he noticed this last, despite himself, he heaved a sigh of relief. Then Captain Blondin sat down at the cabin table opposite him, lost in deep meditation.

"One hundred thousand in gold," he said after a time, rather to himself than to Rutherford. "One hundred thousand in gold—a fortune."

"A fortune," repeated Rutherford. "It means much to a young man who has a long life before him in which to enjoy it; it means position, friends, power. I wish that I were in your place, Captain, and that you stood in mine."

"Stop," said Captain Blondin. "Stop. Do not disturb me. I must think. Will you have wine or a cigar? You will find both upon the sideboard."

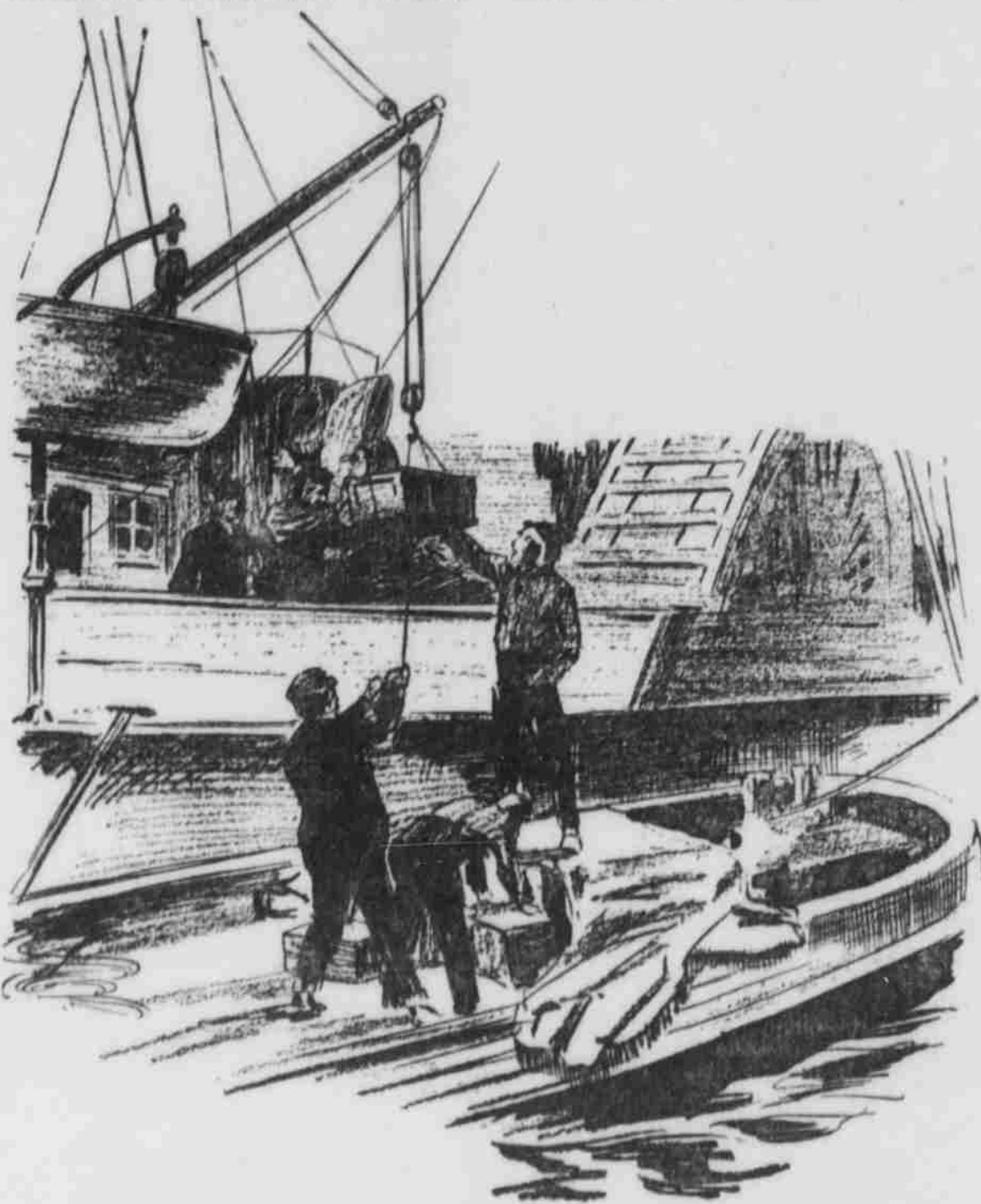
Rutherford rose, helped himself generously to the wine and selected a fat, black cigar and lit it. Then he returned to his chair, where he leaned back quite at his ease regarding Captain Blondin. The latter had risen from his chair and was pacing up and down the cabin.

At last he approached the table. Rutherford felt instinctively that the crucial moment had come; here he must win his fight or lose it. He braced himself in his chair, his lips partly open, his tongue ready to voice his arguments.

"Mr. Rutherford," said the Captain, "I will accept your offer upon the following conditions: You are to bring this money on board the ship and make the trip with me; and I am not to know the name of my port of destination until I ask for it. The Banshee sails tonight at 10 o'clock. I mention this so that you may know just how much time you have in which to get the money on board."

As he spoke the look of exultation upon Rutherford's face gradually vanished. He reflected for a moment before he replied.

"You name terms which I fear my superiors will never accept, Captain Blondin."



That Evening a Lighter Was Towed Up Alongside the Banshee.

he said disappointedly. "I do not know absolutely that they will refuse. Perhaps if you would have an interview with them the affair might be arranged."

"If you think that it will do any good I shall be pleased to see them here, sir. But remember, Mr. Rutherford, the conditions which I name cannot be changed."

Rutherford bowed and rose from his chair. "I will go for them," he said. "I will have them here within the hour."

He was as good as his word. One of the two men who returned with him was Le Fevre, chief of the United States secret service bureau at Liverpool; the other, Montague, his most trusted subordinate. Captain Blondin knew both of them, by sight. He received them with a quiet courtesy which became him well.

There was silence for a moment after the party had seated themselves. Le Fevre, a small dark man, with an impassive face, was the first to break it. "To comply with your conditions would be a deed befitting the inmate of a madhouse, Captain Blondin," he said.

"I have my reasons, sir. With regard to the money, I have pressing and immediate need of it and it will not answer my purpose to return to Liverpool to collect it. As to the stipulation regarding the port of destination, I enjoy the full confidence of my employers and do not wish to violate it by entering into a definite agreement to deliver the Banshee at any port, until such time as I may feel free to act upon my own account."

"Rather a nice distinction, Captain Blondin," remarked Le Fevre with an ill concealed sneer.

"Perhaps, sir; but I am privileged to make it, if I so desire. There is always the chance that circumstances may arise to prevent my carrying out my part of the agreement. For instance, I may be entrusted with messages of importance, the delivery of which would be more binding upon me than any agreement which I might make with you."

"In which case we would be out just \$100,000," remarked Le Fevre dryly.

"Not at all, sir. If I fail to deliver the Banshee and her cargo at the port designated by your agent your money will be returned to you at Liverpool. I do not wish to take money that I do not earn."

The faces of his listeners plainly showed astonishment, mingled with admiration.

When Le Fevre again spoke his manner and tone had sensibly altered.

"You seem inclined to deal fairly by us, Captain Blondin."

"I am, sir. If I take the money at all it must be in accordance with the letter of our agreement."

"If you will allow us the use of your cabin for a conference you may have our answer at once. Before deciding finally I wish to consult with my associates."

"It is entirely at your service, sir. There are none here to disturb your councils." He threw open the doors of the staterooms opening into the cabin as he spoke, showing that they were vacant. "A single tap upon that gong at your elbow will call one who will summon me when you again desire my presence."

A long and earnest consultation followed his departure from the cabin. Experience had taught the three secret service men wariness. There was a division of opinion among them, Montague stoutly holding out for a refusal despite all the arguments that Le Fevre and Rutherford could bring to bear upon him. It was nearly an hour after the captain had left them that the boy who did

curiously as the trap was put into place and the lock sprung.

"One hundred thousand dollars," replied Captain Blondin.

"One hundred thousand dollars. And it is all for the Confederacy?"

"It is all for the Confederacy," with a glance at Rutherford.

"I am glad," she said softly. "The Confederacy needs all that it can get, to carry on the war. But I shall be happier when we have conquered the North and the strife is over. Good night, brother. Good night, Mr. Rutherford."

She left the cabin. Both men stood in silence for some little time after her departure. Then Captain Blondin turned to Rutherford.

"She thinks that the money is for the Confederacy. She is a truer patriot than her brother."

"Women often get those mistaken ideas," growled Rutherford. "And they stick to 'em, too, against all rhyme and reason."

"And yet, Mr. Rutherford, I almost repeat of my bargain. To blacken an unsullied name; to give up the laurels which I have so fairly and hardly won; to exchange the confidence and friendship of my old associates for their disgust and scorn—these are things to be lightly set aside. No, Mr. Rutherford, I will not do this. My good name is worth more to me than the reward of projected treachery. Take back your gold, sir, and release me from my pledge."

The earnestness with which he spoke alarmed Rutherford and caused him to fear for the ultimate success of his project. His training, however, stood him in good stead and his countenance showed no trace of the disappointment that he inwardly felt as he replied:

"I'll not insist, if you're so opposed to it, Captain. But, once you come to think things over you may see them in a different light. Suppose that you take me and the money along with you, anyway? If you decide not to carry out your part of the bargain, why, we have your promise to return both to Liverpool. I'm satisfied to trust both myself and the money in your hands."

For some minutes, Captain Blondin was silent.

"I will do as you suggest," he said at last. "There is plenty of time to reach a final decision, and, as you say, I may change my mind."

After Captain Blondin had left the cabin Rutherford drank a glass of wine, lit another cigar and stretched himself comfortably in his chair.

"That was a narrow squeak," he muttered to himself. "As near to a back-down, without being one, as I ever saw."

When Rutherford came upon deck the next morning he found the mate, Dalton, in charge. It was an ideal morning at sea; the breeze was fresh and the waves danced brightly in the clear sunlight. The smoke of several steamers could be seen and the upper sails of several ships, but at such distance that the Banshee with her low top hamper was probably invisible to them.

Dalton touched his cap respectfully in answer to Rutherford's salutation. The latter alluded to the Banshee's speed.

"She's a fast boat, sir," replied the mate. "Fast, but ticklish. We have to watch her. She's so narrow—nine times her beam in length—that if she traveled light a good lap on the broadside from a big roller might make her turn turtle."

A few minutes later Captain Blondin joined them. Rutherford turned to him after he had relieved Dalton of the command of the ship.

"Well, Captain," he inquired, "how do you feel upon the subject after a night's sleep?"

"Hardly like discussing it," replied the captain, smiling. "I will let you know my decision when we have reached the point where it would be necessary to change the Banshee's course, in case I should decide to go on with the matter."

The only thing left for Rutherford to do was to acquiesce. This he did with a very good grace. After that interview he devoted most of his time to Marie Blondin. They spent hours together, either walking up and down the deck or talking together in the great cabin.

He found her a most agreeable companion. As they grew better acquainted he gradually and unconsciously dropped the mask of self-restraint which he had imposed upon himself at the beginning of their acquaintance, and at times both his manner and speech were coarse and vulgar. But she did not appear to notice the change in him. She was a good listener and she encouraged him to talk of himself, and vain and bombastic as he was it proved to be a theme of great interest to him.

Engrossed in his flirtation with Marie Blondin, Rutherford scarcely noted the swift passage of the days, and it was with a feeling of surprise that he heard Captain Blondin say one afternoon:

"Today is the eighth day out, Mr. Rutherford. Tonight at 8 o'clock I shall expect to hear from you the name of our port of destination. I have thought the matter over, carefully, and have decided to abide by my agreement with Mr. Le Fevre."

Rutherford was much elated. "I can give it to you now," he began. But Captain Blondin's small, gloved hand rose in protest.

"Not now, Mr. Rutherford, I beg of you. Remember our compact. Eight o'clock tonight is the earliest that I care to hear it."

At 8 o'clock that evening Rutherford and Captain Blondin sat in the cabin. Upon the table before the captain lay his watch, at which from time to time he glanced. Rutherford was secretly amused at the captain's over-punctiliousness, as he regarded it; but